**8th November 2020**

**Micah 4:1-5 and John 14:15-27**

**Remembrance Sunday**

Last year, when we commemorated the centenary of the very first marking of Armistice Day, in November 1919, none of us in our wildest imaginings could have foreseen how we would find ourselves *this* Remembrance Sunday, joined together not in person, but *online*.

It was the idea of King George V that the end of the First War should be marked in the way that’s become traditional since that time. King George was a technological innovator – he was the monarch who, in 1932, albeit rather reluctantly, embraced the relatively new medium of radio, to address the people of the United Kingdom and what’s now the Commonwealth, in the very first Christmas Day Royal Broadcast. So, there’s perhaps rather a nice symmetry in the way we are able to take advantage of today’s modern technology this morning, to join together *online* to remember the fallen; those who served in the past; and those who continue to serve us today.

King George V wrote the following words from Buckingham Palace, at the start of November 1919:

“To all my people,

Tuesday next, November 11, is the first anniversary of the Armistice, which stayed the world-wide carnage of the four preceding years, and marked the victory of right and freedom.

I believe that my people in every part of the Empire, fervently wish to perpetuate the memory of that great deliverance, and of those who laid down their lives to achieve it.

To afford an opportunity for the universal expression of this feeling, it is my desire and hope that, at the hour when the Armistice came into force – the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month – there may be for the brief space of two minutes a complete suspension of all our normal activities. During that time, except in the rare cases when this may be impracticable, all work, all sound and all locomotion should cease, so that in perfect stillness the thoughts of everyone may be concentrated on reverent remembrance of the glorious dead.”

Some of the language in which King George addressed his people may sit rather less comfortably with us now, a century later, but the purpose behind our commemoration this morning - here in our Cranmer Group of parishes; across the whole of our nation; and throughout the globe – remains very largely the same. As I said in my welcome to our service:

“We come together today before God, to remember all those men and women who have served, especially those who gave their lives for us, that we might have the freedoms and privileges that we enjoy today.”

We now know that the hope that was carried by so many in 1919, that the Great War would be the last of its kind, has proved to be false. Not only the Second World War, only two decades after the First, but then also the many conflicts across our world that have taken place in the three quarters of a century since *its* end, and which continue today, have given the lie to – what, in hindsight – was naïve and profoundly unrealistic optimism.

The writer of our first lesson this morning, the prophet Micah, also lived at a time when a state of warfare was all-too-real - for him and for the whole people of Judah, the southern part of the nation of Israel. Micah wrote when the Assyrian Empire was at the very height of its military power; brutally sweeping all before it; destroying cities, villages and livelihoods; butchering communities; plundering their possessions; leading them in chains into exile. You only have to see some of the carved reliefs that the Assyrians left behind, now in the British Museum, to see their ruthless military machine in action; & sense the terror with which their victims viewed them.

This was the FEAR with which the people to whom Micah was writing, lived day-by-day.

In contemporary society, we don’t have to live with this immediate threat of brutal warfare hanging over us, as Micah and his contemporaries did. But *this* year, we *too* have found ourselves growing accustomed to fear, from a new source, the unseen enemy that is the Coronavirus.

But Micah declares to the people of Judah *then* – and his words make the same declaration to us *today* - that a time will come when we will no longer have to fear. He says to them – and to *us* - that there is HOPE for a future; a future of PEACE; a future in which, in his words, “no-one will make them afraid”; in which *we* have no need to be afraid. Micah writes that it is when the whole people listens to God, and what He - the Lord - has been telling *all* nations about how best to live their lives; and when *they* change the way in which they behave, *then* this vision of peace - God’s holy city on God’s holy mountain; everyone sitting peacefully under their own vine and under their own fig-tree - will come into being.

Micah uses beautiful and famous imagery to describe the form in which this peace will come. He says that, at that time, all “will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.” It’s a very long time indeed since wars were fought with swords and spears, but I think that, today, we can *still* understand what Micah means. His point is that we *all* have the capacity to change.

Swords and spears were made of iron; used for warfare; for killing other warriors; and for violence against innocent people. They cause destruction and death.

But of course the plowshares and pruning hooks he names are *also* made of *exactly the same iron* as those swords and spears. And they are objects that create LIFE and help that life to FLOURISH. A plough is used to break up hard ground, to free up spaces in the soil for seeds, which grow into the crops that feed us. And pruning hooks are used to trim trees and bushes and vines, removing extraneous growth, in order that these plants concentrate their energies into making greater quantities of richer fruit and grapes, with which to feed us.

It’s *exactly* the same iron, but - used differently, with different *intent* - it results in complete opposites:   
war and destruction, fear and death; or life and health, peace and fruitfulness.

Micah, if we read his words closely, also tells us that such conflict and violence aren’t an inevitable part of human existence. We have a choice in our lives. We can *choose* – the end of verse 3 - to “*train for* war” – that is to practise; to be taught; to learn. Or, *equally*, we can choose – halfway through verse 2 – “to go up to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may *teach* us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths” – that is, paths not of conflict and fear, but of justice and hope; of love and of peace.

We choose to be taught, & we choose to learn; either to follow the way of conflict that’s not of God, or to walk in the paths that are of God. We know from Scripture that each of us is made in the image of our Creator. It’s not in *God’s* character to be in conflict with another. Neither is it *our* natural condition as humanity, to engage in violence or warfare.

In this fallen world, of necessity we may be called upon to defend our freedoms or rights or - above all - our sisters and brothers. But this is not the way Micah sets out for us here, nor the way Jesus sets out for us in the Gospels.

The Bible names Jesus – as we’ll hear in the Christmas narrative a few weeks hence - the Prince of Peace. Christ shows us the way, teaching us how we can be *people* of peace. His command to us is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as you love yourselves.”

In our second reading, from St. John’s Gospel, just before Jesus leaves his disciples and heads towards his crucifixion, he says to them, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.”

We’ve prayed earlier this morning, too, in our Collect, that the love and justice of God may guide and inspire all, “that peoples & nations may find their security in the love which casts out fear.”

Fear looks *around*; apprehensive.

Worry looks *in* on itself; anxious.

But faith looks *up*; confident.

Up to the cross, on which Jesus transformed darkness into light; and death into life; as he rose again after three days, conquering sin & death.

Up; confident; since we have the assurance that Jesus gives his disciples in this passage too; that, - even though he will be going from them, to return to his Heavenly Father - he will be leaving with them (and with us) the Holy Spirit; the Spirit who works within each one of us, should we invite him in, to do so; who transforms us into Christ-like-ness; who enables us, in *our* lives, to choose the paths that are the ways of God; paths of truth and justice; paths of hope, peace and love.

On this Remembrance Sunday, we look back to all those who sacrificed so much. We honour them, and we give thanks for those who continue to place *their* lives in danger, serving the people of our country and of other nations too, in order that we might know goodness, justice and peace in *our* daily lives.

Lord, help us, we pray - through the power of your Holy Spirit working in us - to repay that debt by *choosing* to walk in *your* paths throughout *our* lives.

To recognise, as Micah did, that there is a better way; a way not of swords, but of ploughshares; not of spears, but of pruning hooks.

To stand *against* fear; to stand *against* division; to stand *against* conflict; to stand *against* war. And, instead, Lord, to embrace, and to spread, your Gospel of justice. Your Gospel of hope. Your Gospel of peace. And your Gospel of love.

In the name of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, we pray.

Amen.